

## Dynamics of Pepper Trade in West Coast of Aceh in 1873-1921

Nurul Romdloni,\* Singgih Tri Sulistiyono, Yety Rochwulaningsih  
Master Program of History, Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University

\*Corresponding Author: [nurul.romdlani640@gmail.com](mailto:nurul.romdlani640@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This research examines on economic trading activities in the West Coast of Aceh which has been one of the largest pepper producing centers in Southeast Asia since the end of the 18th century. It found that export of pepper commodities from the West Coast of Aceh was happened far behind the East Coast of Aceh. It was influenced by several factors, such as the war that began in the Netherlands in 1873 which resulted in trade in the West Coast of Aceh being hampered. The beach blockade carried out by the Dutch made the distribution of pepper disrupted. The scorched earth tactics resulted in the decline of pepper production. The condition of pepper trade in the West Coast of Aceh, which had already deteriorated, was no longer able to rise, even after the Aceh War was over. This study used historical method which emphasized on primary sources based on reports and colonial publications. The poor condition of pepper trade in the West Coast of Aceh was compounded by the increasing demand for other commodities such as copra, kapok, and patchouli oil. Private capital that began to be opened after the war flowed more to the development of various new commodities.

**Keywords:** Pepper Trade; Economic History; West Coast of Aceh.

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### Introduction

The West Coast of Aceh has been widely known by the world before the East Coast of Aceh. Traders from Gujarat, China, Middle East, and South East Asia has been visited Aceh since the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Anderson, 1971, pp. 1-50). One of the main commodities in West Coast of Aceh during that time was pepper. It has so many advantages, such as for cooking, preservative, medicine and perfume ingredient. It was so valuable that pepper had been used as legal currency, medium for paying tax, etc. ("djpen kemendag," p. 5-6). The various advantages of pepper encouraged the demand and higher price of this commodity.

Pepper production in the West Coast of Aceh was rapidly developing since Leube Dapa, a ruler from Singkil, massively cultivated pepper in the 18th century. Since then, the West coast of Aceh became one major pepper exporter in the South East Asia. Even though the pepper production area was shifting to the North and East region, the West Coast of Aceh existed until the Aceh War. It was going on for almost three decade in the West Coast of Aceh and it greatly affected the pepper trade in that area. The pepper production was declining and the community faced difficulties in

distributing it. After the war was over, pepper trade in the West Coast of Aceh could never bring back those golden era. What did the Dutch do during the Aceh War that lead to the fall of pepper production in the West Coast of Aceh? Was there any effort from the community to maintain their pepper trade? Was the Dutch occupation in the West Coast of Aceh affected the poor trade of pepper? This article examines all these questions.

Trade is one of the economic activities in the form of the exchange of goods based on profit mutual agreement. The discussion on trade involves the process of an item being produced until the item has acted on behalf of the consumer. In the production process, pepper commodities involves the required land area, capital providers, land cultivators, as well as obstacles in the planting process. Meanwhile, after being harvested up to the hands of consumers, it is necessary to pay attention to those involved in the trade process, the existence of roads and ports, and the situation that becomes obstacles or drivers of the trade process running smoothly.

This study refers to the administrative area in Afdeeling Aceh during the Dutch East Indies era, namely Afdeeling Westkust van Atjeh. It covers several districts that are part of the province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam: West Aceh Beach District, South Aceh District, Aceh Singkil Regency, Simeulue Regency, Nagan Raya Regency, and Aceh Jaya Regency.

As noted, studies on economic conditions in Aceh during the colonial period have not been carried out. Fewer publications specifically discuss the economy of Aceh's West Coast. Some publications such as Langhout (1923) and Gonggrijp (1924) focus on Aceh's economy in the colonial period, but it only looked at economic development in Aceh as a result of Dutch policies in the area and abandoned the local supports. Meanwhile Tirta (2017) examines on the situation which influenced the trade relations between European and Asian in general colored by the competition of imperialism among European nations themselves. The competition continued and colored other relations outside of commercial affairs. However it only covers until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Method

This article used history method to keep the results of the research objective. It used primary and secondary data sources. The researcher obtained those data sources from searching the National Archives of Indonesia, National Library, Hatta Corner at Gadjah Mada University Library, and online searching at jstor and other credible online websites. The primary sources were mostly the published reports. After collecting the sources, the researcher externally and internally critiqued it to obtain the actual and credible facts. The facts were then associated with imagination, interpretation, and theories at the synthesizing phase. At the last phase, the results of synthesizing were written in standard Indonesian language (Garraghan, 1957, p. 33).

### **Geography and Transport System in the West Coast of Aceh**

The West Coast of Aceh is about 21.010 km<sup>2</sup> and astronomically located at 4° 51' 30" to 2° 52' N Latitude and 95° 24' 45" to 97° 37' 45" W Longitude (Harsrinuksmo, 2004). Geographically, it is surrounded by Tjarakmon River at the North; Indian Ocean at the West; Pedir Settlement, Gayo and Alas at the East; and the imaginary lines between Kenegerian (equivalent to Province) Si Lekat and Si Badi extending from the Pintu Rimba hills to Oeloe Bengkong at the South (van Langen, 1888, pp. 7-8).

The location of Bukit Barisan made the rivers in the west Coast have shorter streams than rivers in the East Coast. The rivers mostly flow through the East to the West, from the top of Bukit Barisan Mountain and empty into the Indian Ocean. However, there were some rivers with winding streams and became parallel with the coast lines. Many small rivers were found in the West Coast of Aceh. They were mostly sandy at the outfalls, and only local ships could pass through them. However, there were some big rivers that foreign ships could sail, such as in Teunom, Woyla, Meulaboh, Senagan, Tripah and Kluwat. At least, until the Aceh war was over, the rivers were chosen as the interregional lines of transportation and communication. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the roads were only footpaths. The population was relatively small and they believed that water transportation was quite sufficient.

The coast line extended from the Northwest to the South East, directly side by side with the Indian Ocean. The waters was comparatively rough than the East Coast and the North Coast. Corals, rocks, and small islands were scattered far away from the coastal area. Ketapang Pasir, Boeboen, and the waters between Melaboeh and O. Radja had relatively calm current. Meanwhile, the most dangerous stream was between Soesoeh and Tapa Tuan. At least before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, none could accurately predict the location and the depth where corals lied at, made it hard for men to reach the coast (van Langen, 1888, pp. 7-8).

### ***Kenegerian* as Autonomy and Position of *Uleebalang* in Aceh's Political Structure**

The authority of Sultan Aceh over the conquered regions, including the West Coast of Aceh, had been decreasing since Sultan Iskandar Muda passed away. Sultan Iskandar Muda was considered as authoritative by several rulers who were eligible for electing *sultan* (Alfian, 1987, p. 39). This reason encouraged them to choose women sultans for four consecutively periods in 1641-1699 M. During these periods, the power of the Sultan was weaken. The Sultan was still recognized by Aceh people, but his power could only be perceived at the capital and coastal cities. Since then, many ruler positions including *imam*, *uleebalang*, *mantri*, and other administrative officers became hereditary and secular (Reid, 2005, p. 3-4).

Before the Dutch penetration in the West Coast of Aceh, this region had been divided into several independent *kenegerian*, and some were joining in federation. *Kenegerian* in the Aceh regional structure was an independent region that is separated one from another. A *kenegerian* was led by *uleebalang* who was passed down and was officially announced by the sultan through *sarakata* issuance. For *uleebalang*, *sarakarta*

was nonessential as even without it, he was still recognized as the ruler. Yet, *uleebalang* confirmed that his region was the part of Aceh kingdom (Ismail, 1991, pp. 102-116).

The falling of the sultan's power was marked with the catapult of *uleebalang* roles in the existence of Aceh kingdom. This role was improving during the early the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the pepper trade was growing rapidly. Even though *uleebalang* symbolically subjected to the sultan by providing tax and troops whenever needed, the sultan almost had no authority in the region under *uleebalang*. *Uleebalang* had an absolute authority of the governance and economic of his region. It is often found that the political power of *uleebalang* was come from his power over economy (Ismail, 1991, pp. 102-116).

The authority of *uleebalang* over his region had caused the Dutch to face difficulties to take over Aceh at once. The power of *kenegerian* could not automatically fall into the Dutch's hand when they conquered the Aceh kingdom. They struggled hard to conquer the entire region of Aceh, especially the coastal area.

### Pepper Trade amidst the War

Pepper was the main commodity exported from the West Coast of Aceh in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. United States contributed the biggest roles for pepper trade in the West Coast of Aceh. American traders had been making transaction with the local traders since the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the conflict in 1830, the American traders kept trading in the West Coast of Aceh. The community of the West Coast of Aceh was open in trading without anyone, except with the Dutch. Acehnese had hard feeling toward the Dutch since the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Long, 1973, pp. 143-62).

The Dutch Aggression reached the West Coast of Aceh in 1873 by conducting coast blockade. With the restriction, the Dutch wished to suppress the Acehnese economic to the maximum extent and forced them to recognize their authority. In 1873, the Dutch seized 105 people on the sea and 30 of them were the people of Straits Settlement. Most of them came from the British brig, *Mariner's Hope*, who were arrested on the offshore of West Coast of Aceh on July 1873 (Reid, 2005, pp. 112-117).

The blockade by the Dutch during the period made the trade in the West Cost of Aceh decreased. Shipping of the pepper from the West Cost of Aceh were difficult, especially to Europe and Penang. The pepper that was regularly shipped to the Mediterranean had to be postponed since the war broke out in 1873, and it was started again in 1876 (Ismail, 1991, p. 1-41). Pepper shipping to Penang were also declining, marked with the bankruptcy of companies engaged in pepper trade. One of the companies affected by this policy was the company of Kho Tim Poh which was managed along with other Chinese traders in Penang. The Dutch blockade made the company established since 1872 went bankrupt. In Rigaih, the pepper piled up to 60.000 piculs in 1875. It forced Pocut Muhammad, *uleebalang* of Rigaih, to immediately recognize the Dutch authority (Ismail, 1991, pp. 106-107)

When the Dutch occupied *kraton* Aceh on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1874, Van Swieten announced their winning and made the *uleebalangs* recognized the new authority in their regions. The coast blockade would be revoked if the region willing to

acknowledge them. In the coastal area where pepper trade is very crucial, this announcement was immediately answered even only on paper. The region in the Southern Meulaboh signed the statement letter containing six articles that were: accept the Dutch sovereignty and their flag, prohibit the relationship with foreign countries or support the Dutch enemies, and against slavery, piracy, and injustice government (Reid, 2005, pp. 115-117).

The immediate respond from the local rulers was inspired by the advantages of *Kenegerian* Idi in the West Coast of Aceh who supported the Dutch since the beginning. However, as described earlier, most of the statement was not followed with the actual support. On the contrary, these *kenegerian* still openly providing aids such as troops and supplies to support the resistance against the Dutch.

The Dutch blockade policy in the coastal areas often changed. It was because: first, change of position of the minister of colony. The minister of colony was likely to perform the policy without considering the follow up policy of the previous minister. Second, the blockade policy was changed due to the suppression of other European countries, especially British, who hold a major role in Malaka's trade. Many traders in Penang and Singapore had invested in Aceh to obtain pepper supplies during the harvest. The connivance of the countries on the Dutch expanded their impact to Aceh since the Dutch had promised not to limit their trade in Aceh. However, the Dutch did not keep their promise and instead, they used blockade tactic to limit Aceh relationship with foreign countries. In 1882, due to the suppression by British, the Dutch had to open their blockade for British traders at Aceh ports (Said, 1985, pp. 79-105). The third was because of unexpected resistance of the Aceh people. The Dutch had to withdraw their troops to defense posts when the resistance of Aceh people was increasing. It was to prevent more victims from their side.

In the middle of the blockade since 1873, the trade in Aceh ports was overall declining. Yet, the trade was still going on. The trade with foreigners, especially with traders from Penang was conducted carefully. The transaction often held during the night when the Dutch patrol ships were off guard (Tagliacozzo, 2005, pp. 1-2).

In the trade process, pepper was still become the main commodity expected from Aceh. Meanwhile, the Acehnese only accepted payment that could support and sustain their resistance against the Dutch, both on the form of weapon or basic commodity such as rice. A letter dated May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1890 informed that the head of *kenegerian* in Aceh often communicated with foreign traders asking for their weapon supplies. As an agreement, the foreign traders would receive pepper in low prices. This transaction was found out by the Dutch but the traders were too smart to catch on hand (Tagliacozzo, 2005, pp. 1-2).

In November 1883, a British ship "Nisero" ran aground at Teunom. The Dutch immediately suspected weapon smuggling activities in exchange for pepper by the ship. This was because Teunom was a place of resistance as well as pepper-producing areas. The reason said by "Nisero" that sailed from Surabaya to Suez needed more coal for fuel and therefore headed to the Uleelheue port in Banda Aceh did not make sense. Banda Aceh was too far from Teunom on the West Coast of Aceh (Dadek &

Hermasnyah, 2013, pp. 49-51). One of the ships that was often able to pass through Dutch supervision and successfully reached the West Coast of Aceh was Hok Canton ship. The ship chartered by Tjo Ttjan Siat, a Chinese man who was also a supplier for the Dutch navy, was able to easily dock at the ports of Aceh and Penang (Kreemer, 1922, pp. 24-35). Under the ship captain named Hansen, Hok Canton ship often anchored in the ports of Rigaih and Uleulhue (Aceh Besar). He took this risk to get big profits from pepper commodities, which were sold cheaply in these ports. Another ship known to carry out transactions on the West Coast of Aceh even after the war erupted was the Eagle under Captain Roura. These two ships in 1886 were involved in a dispute with Teuku Umar, which led to the involvement of the Dutch (Dadek & Hermasnyah, 2013, pp. 49-51).

As mentioned earlier, the Dutch offered high bounty to those who were able to capture Teuku Umar. This offer was very interesting for Hansen as the trade relationship between Hansen and Teuku Umar had long been established. By utilizing the transaction, Hansen intended to trap Teuku Umar on his ship and handed him over to the Dutch. In the execution, Teuku Umar who already knew Hansen's bad intentions attacked Hok Canton first. As a result, Hansen was killed and his wife was taken hostage. The Hok Canton ship was taken over by captain Roura and taken to Uleulhue port. At this port, Roura reported the series of events to the Dutch (Said, 2005).

The attack to Hok Canton became an international concern. Although Hansen and his wife were not Dutch citizens, this attack gave a negative view of the Dutch ability to manage their territory. The Dutch immediately mobilized various warships scattered in the Dutch East Indies to Rigaih to defeat Teuku Umar and free the hostages. The Dutch attempt failed with many victims on their side. Finally, two months after the Hok Canton attack, the Dutch was willing to hand over \$25,000 to Teuku Umar for the release of hostages (Krujt, 1896, p. 51).

After the Hok Canton incident, the Dutch strictly limit the shipping in Aceh waters by issuing "Scheepvaartregeling" (shipping regulations for ships). This regulation required every ship that wanted to stop in Aceh to dock at Uleulhue, Idi, Lhok Sumawe, Weh Island, and Raya Island. Waters outside the ports were closed and patrolled by military vessels. The complete closure of waters on the West Coast of Aceh to all voyages from 1887, following waters in other areas. This policy resulted in the pepper distribution process fell in slump (Krujt, 1896, p. 51).

In addition to cut off the distribution route, the Dutch also destroyed pepper production centers in the West Coast of Aceh. Pepper production decreased significantly in the *kenegerian* that had become the centers of resistance. There were two reasons, first because many people went to war and left their *gampong* (villages), consequently the pepper plantations were neglected and abandoned. Second, the Dutch army suppressed the villages and pepper plantations in these areas.

Lhok Gleumpang was originally an area rich in its main commodity, pepper. The war reaching the *kenegerian* caused many pepper plantations destroyed and abandoned. In the years before the War, Lhok Gleumpang was able to produce 2000

piculs of pepper per year. After the war, these crops dropped drastically. The war also resulted in a decline in the population living in the *kenegerian*. In short, the villages were abandoned. In 1906, there were only 400 men registered as residents in Lhok Gleumpang. Before that, the population of Lhok Gleumpang was estimated to be almost ten times that number. Reports related to this decline were written in *Mededeelingen Betreffende Eenige Atjehsche Onderhoorigheden* as follows:

*Lageuen-Lho\* Gloempang is een land, dat vroeger een groote mate van welvaart genoot, had toen een bevolking, die misschien tien maal zoo sterk was als thans en behalve in de gampongs vooral in de pepertuinen, die hier in groote getale voorkwamen, leefden.*

*De tegenwoordige bevolking is arm, de pepertuinen zijn door het optreden van Teukoe Oema in deze streken of verwoest of geheel verwaarloosd.*

*Evenals in Kroeeng Sabe is ook in Lageueu-Lho\* Gloempang Teukoe Oema's optreden de hoofdoorzaak van den grooten achteruitgang. Van de groote welvarende pepertuinen -Lageuen heeft toch tijden gehad dat het 2000 picols peper 'sjaars uitvoerde- is niet veel overgebleven.*

[Lageuen-Lhok Gloempang was a prosperous region back then with a population that might be ten times more than it is today, the residents lived in villages as well in pepper plantations, as there were many workers there

The community was currently poor, pepper gardens had been destroyed or completely abandoned due to Teuku Umar activities in this region.

Like in Krueng Sabe, Teuku Umar actions also caused many setbacks in Lageuen Lhok Gleumpang. From a prosperous pepper plantation – where Lageuen once imported 2000 piculs of pepper per year - now there is not much left.]

The similar situation also happened in Blang Pidie. Back then this town was rich and consisted of densely populated villages, but now they were almost completely abandoned. Each village only left a small population. There were those who remained in their homes among them, some also often found surviving in the pepper fields and plantations. During the war, there was almost no cash flow in the *kenegerian*. Before the war, Blang Pidie was famous for its abundant fields and forests.

*Het landschap Blang Pidie leed het meest door den oorlog na onze bezetting van de Westkust. De vroeger zoo dicht bevolkte en rijke gampongs werden toen bijna geheel' verlaten; sedert keerde wel een gedeelte van de bevolking terug, doch op verre na niet alles.*

[Blang Pidie suffered the most losses due to war in our efforts to occupy the West Coast. Previously, this town has a dense population and consisted of prosperous villages which were almost entirely abandoned later; since then some residents had returned but not all.]

### **Pepper Price Fluctuation and Number of Pepper Exports**

Most pepper exported from Aceh is black pepper. Until 1913, pepper was exported through Penang and Singapore. This distribution route then changed due to the First

World War. Pepper from Aceh was first transported to Batavia and then exported to America, China and Sweden. America became the largest export destination for the black and white pepper of Dutch East Indies.

During World War I, the demand for various export commodities increased dramatically. Responding to the higher demand, the prices of various products had also increased, pepper was no exception. Chart 4.2 and chart 4.3 below represent the pepper price in Amsterdam after the Aceh War. As can be seen in chart 4.2 the pepper price tends to stagnate with the lowest price of f21 in 1907 and the highest price of f30.667. This figure then increased dramatically during World War I.

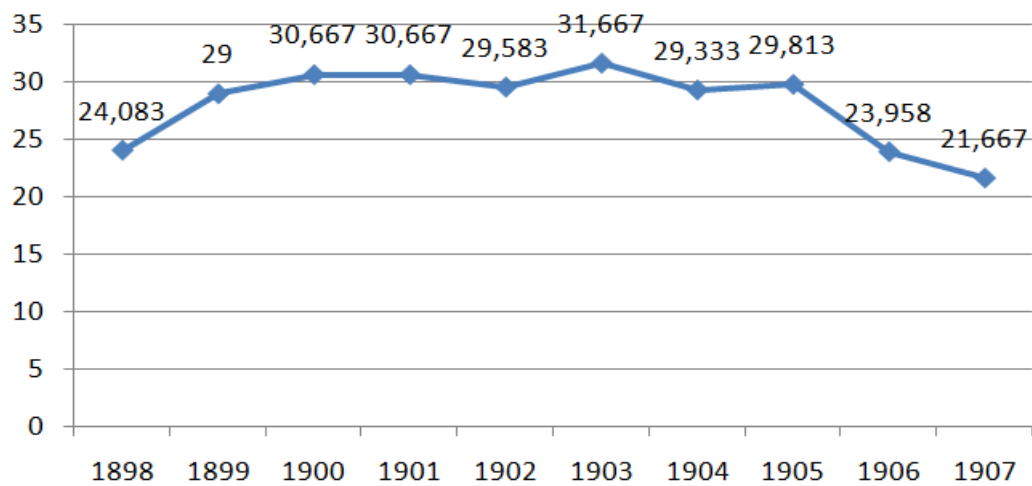


Figure 1. Average of annual pepper prices per year from 1898 – 1907, (*Economisch Statistische Berichten* April 5, 1922).

In 1914, pepper price was still in the range of f29.5, not much changed from the price in 1907. The price then increased dramatically in 1915, reaching f48,656. It kept continuing during the First World War, then the pepper price moved above f50,, with the highest price in 1916 reaching 104.75. This price fluctuation can be seen in Figure 2.

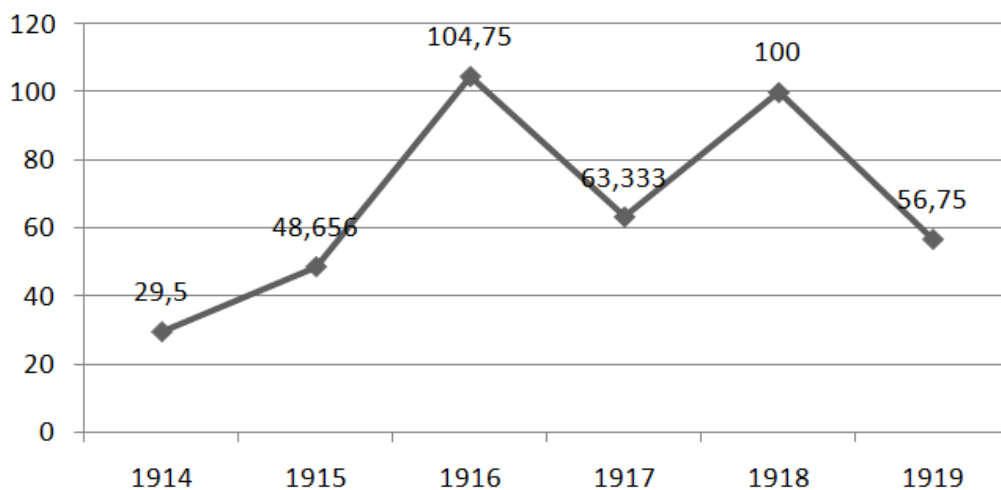


Figure 2. Average annual pepper prices per year from 1914 – 1919



(*Economisch Statistische Berichten* April 5, 1922).

Pepper circulating in Amsterdam was originated from the Dutch East Indies. It meant that the prices in Amsterdam were higher than in Batavia. The pepper price in Batavia in 1919 had reached f50 per picul, then dropped to f29, rising to f40 and stable at f47. In the same year, the pepper price in Amsterdam reached f56.75 per ½ kg. The high pepper price lasted until the mid-1920s. Trade prosperity had to cease and decline in the late 1920s. Prices of pepper and other commodities plummeted. At the end of 1920 the pepper price in Batavia touched f20 per picul after previously at f47.

A sudden fall of the pepper price hit the pepper cultivation in Aceh. The crops obtained were not able to cover the capital that had been channeled in the planting of pepper before, so that many pepper plantations stopped operating. Below is a chart of the number of pepper export in Aceh in 1914-1921. It was seen that pepper exports have increased since the start of World War I, from 2,314,631 kg in 1914 to 3,198,212 kg in 1915. The number of pepper export reached its peak in 1918, then the numbers were gradually declined in the subsequent years. In 1920, pepper export from the entire Aceh were only 2,229,142 kg. This number decreased from exports in 1919 which reached a total of 3,241,961 kg.

In 1914-1921 period, pepper from Aceh was exported from several export ports spread across Aceh Besar, North Coast of Aceh, East Coast of Aceh and West Coast of Aceh. In Aceh Besar, there was Oleulhue port. On the North Coast of Aceh, there were Sigli and Lhok Seumawe ports. On the East Coast of Aceh, there were Idi, Langsa and Tjalang ports. Finally, on the West Coast of Aceh, there were Meulaboh, Tapa' Tuan and Singkel ports.

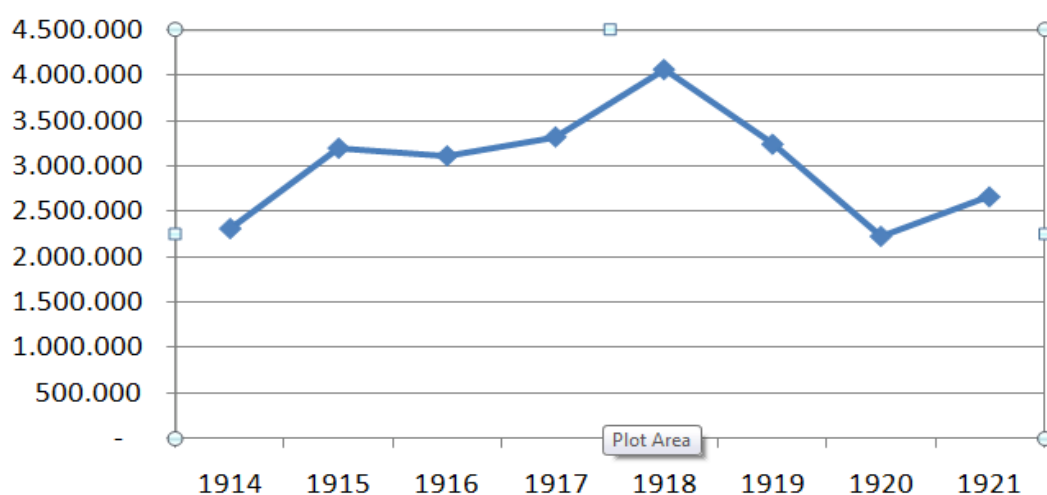


Figure 3. Number of Aceh Pepper Export (in kg) in 1914 – 1921  
(Kreemer, 1922, pp. 93-94).

Figure 3 and 4 show the number of pepper export in Aceh port areas. As seen in chart 4.5, the number of export from the West Coast of Aceh areas respectively was far

less than the total export of other regions, such as Langsa and Idi on the East Coast, Lhok Seumawe on the North Coast, and Oleulhue in Aceh Besar.

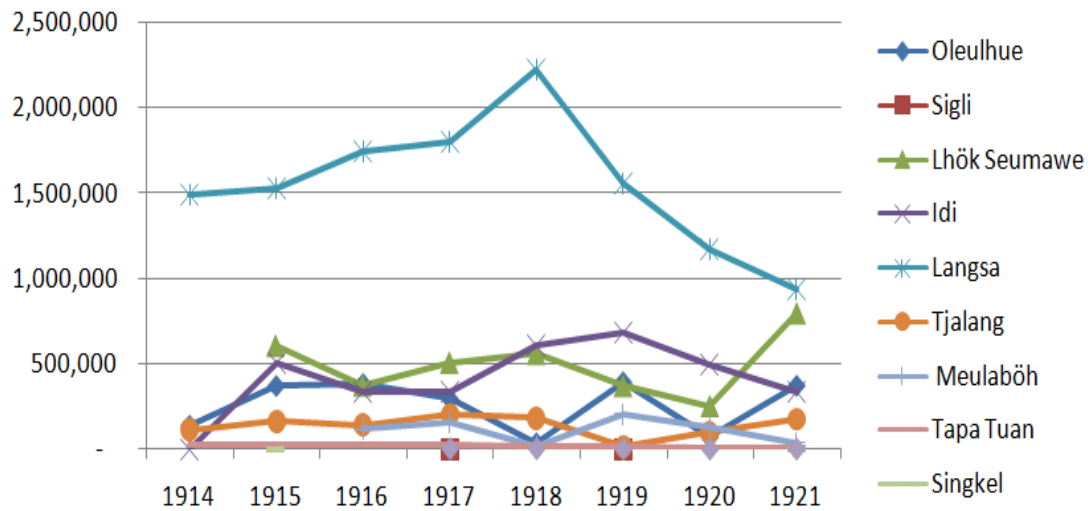


Figure 4. Number of Pepper Export from Aceh's export ports in 1914 – 1921, (Kreemer, 1922, pp. 93-94).

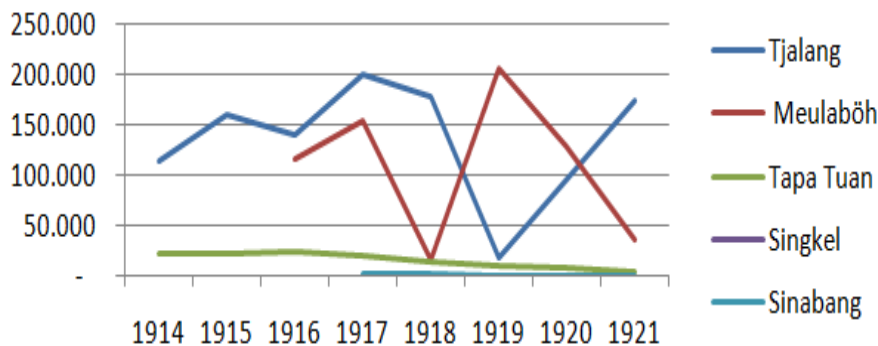


Figure 5. Number of Pepper Export from the ports of West Coast of Aceh in 1914-1921 (Kreemer, 1922, p. 93-94).

Meanwhile, according on Figure 4 and 5, it can be seen that the largest number of pepper export came from Meulaboh and Tjalang ports. Until 1918, the chart movement of the number of pepper export in the two ports was relatively the same. However, since 1919, the chart movement of the number of export in Tjalang and Meulaboh ports became totally different. Unlike the relatively fluctuating Tjalang and Meulaboh, the number of pepper export in Tapa Tuan, which was the main export port of kapok commodities, continued to decline from year to year. From 22,329 kg in 1914, export from Tapa Tuan continued to decline to 3,578 kg in 1921.

According to the explanation, it can be concluded that the production of pepper on the West Coast of Aceh, which was destroyed after the Aceh War, was unable to rise again until 1921. After the West Coast of Aceh was fully controlled, the Dutch began to carry out various policies such as taxation, abolishing *uleebalang* (head of

government) monopoly on pepper, and repairing some infrastructure. These policies were not able to boost pepper production back on the West Coast of Aceh. Another factor that also had an impact on the poor development of the pepper trade was the demand for commodities such as copra, kapok, and patchouli oil. The community chose to plant these new commodities instead of planting pepper.

## Conclusion

Various efforts carried out by the Dutch in the process of conquering the West Coast of Aceh resulted in the decline of pepper trade in the West Coast of Aceh. The pepper distribution process was hampered by the coast blockade. In 1873, the pepper shipping to the Mediterranean was stopped due to the blockade by the Dutch. In 1876, the trade resumed because the blockade was disrupted by the resistance from Acehnese. In 1887, the blockade was tightened again, but the pepper trade continued behind the Dutch's back. During the war period, pepper was often used as a medium of exchange to obtain weapons and staple. In addition to hamper the distribution process, the Dutch also interrupted the production process. At the end of the war, the Dutch destroyed and burned blindly *kenegerian* that were considered to be the centers of resistance. These *kenegerian* were left behind, leaving only a few people. *Kenegerian* such as Lhok Gleumpang and Blang Pidie, which were originally the centers of pepper production, were destroyed and abandoned.

The condition of pepper trading worsened due to the growing market demand for other commodities, such as copra, kapok, and patchouli oil in the late 19th century. Private capital, which began to open after the war, flowed more in the development of various new commodities. During 1912-1921, the number of copra and kapok export from the West Coast of Aceh was quite large. On the other hand, the number of export for pepper on the West Coast of Aceh fell behind the other areas in Aceh, such as the East Coast and North Coast of Aceh. Until 1921, the West Coast of Aceh only contributed to pepper export by 216,096 kg from Aceh's total export of 2,663,436 kg.

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